

Higher Technical Qualifications Knowledge Network: Findings from the Skills Commission HTQ Report

March 2024

Session details: The session presented key findings from the latest Skills Commission report [Higher technical qualifications: How to liberate employers and skill workers for the future](#). After an extensive inquiry to gather evidence, the Skills Commission produced a report spelling out five key policy recommendations to improve the relevance and uptake of Level 4 and 5 Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs).

About the speaker: Peter Wilson joined Policy Connect in May 2023 as Senior Researcher in the Education and Skills team. He works with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Skills, Career & Employment, the Skills Commission, and the Higher Education Commission. Previously, Peter completed a PhD in Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick.

Notes from the session

Peter Wilson introduced the report and its key messages around levers of supply and demand:

1. Employer-led demand – is held back due to lack of awareness and weak understanding. HTQs are not embedded in current training pathways (largely seen to be made up of academic degrees or apprenticeships). They are also concerned about a lack of flexibility, and losing staff to large periods of study
2. Learner-led demand – learners cited uncertainty about the employment value of HTQs as the most significant factor influencing demand. There was also hesitancy about taking on student loans. Like employers they noted an apparent lack of flexibility and felt HTQs did not have sufficiently modularised and flexible pathways.
3. Provider-led supply – the report notes a number of barriers to supplying HTQ places – including recruitment difficulties of good staff with adequate industry/employer experiences and the cost of setting up some resource-heavy subjects.

The presentation concluded with an overview of the report's policy recommendations including:

- The government should support a phased employer-focused strategy focusing first on getting employers engaged to:
 - Generate demand and esteem
 - Raise awareness and develop a stronger brand
 - Grow HTQs broader appeal
- The Levy should be reviewed - given the expressed need for L4 and 5 qualifications – to include funding for a wider set of higher technical qualifications.
- The LLE as it is currently configured is not fully suited to driving HTQ and Level 4/5 uptake – the report recommends the reintroduction of maintenance grants for L4/5.

- HTQs must be fully built into Local Skills Improvement Plans, to ensure that they are a key part of the skills roadmap that is developed for each region.
- There is need for the swifter accreditation of modularised study units to create flexible and portable credit and awards. IfATE should draw on its new powers to take this forward.

Questions and discussion points:

Should we be thinking about modularisation more in the design of new Level 4 and Level 5 courses?

Yes - Employers state they either want specific training to focus on a particular (often short-term) need and where possible use the levy to minimise the expense or to develop and grow their overall internal knowledge and skills base over the longer term under the levy through apprenticeships (with 3 to 4-year employment contracts for new starters). If HTQs and Apprenticeships can work together in this space it will be a win-win for providers, learners and employers.

How to we overcome the fact that the classroom based HTQ, and the work-based Apprenticeship are two very different learning experiences? And why would people opt for the former?

It is difficult – at first glance - to see why an HTQ would appeal if (funded) opportunities to learn both on and off the job in an apprenticeship are available. But it is important to recognise that a one-size-fits all approach doesn't meet the needs of all employers. If they want shorter bursts of training, then modularised HTQs may be a very realistic answer.

How do we overcome the challenges that a more modularised offer brings?

It was noted that portability of learning and credit may be challenging as awards are designed differently across the sector. Even if part-time progression between providers is facilitated, it may potentially undermine the integrity of the HTQ qualification – unless we all do the same thing. To minimise some of this difference one provider is developing a standard format across occupational standards, with modularised content and a capstone project (final 40 credits) which can build on a work-based project or simulation.

Might HTQs become a way into accelerated apprenticeships?

The meeting noted that APL is common place in apprenticeships – providers are obliged to look at prior qualifications (as existing knowledge will not be double funded). To port existing learning into an apprenticeship you would need a year's worth of learning left to be ready for the EPA in what can be seen as a very closely scrutinised regulatory context.